

# PRESENTATION FOR HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

23 January 2003 at Camden Town Hall

My name is Ruth Fallman. I was born in Schlochau in Germany. The name of my birthplace changed in the country of Poland after the War. I lived with my mother, father, grandmother and my older brother, Kurt. All my family were hearing.

When I was 3 years old, I started at the Israelite School for the Deaf. It was a boarding school in Weissensee, a district of Berlin, which was a long train journey from my family. My grandmother and brother visited me often but my parents were busy working in their shop.

The war was brewing and some Jewish families were moving out of Germany. I was just a toddler, so I didn't know much of the ugly scenes in the streets, like kids in brown shirts, or nazis in their uniforms, etc. The staff and teachers were very kind and showed no cruelty.

The Headmaster of the school was Dr Felix Reich. In 1938, he was arrested at the school for his "crimes". He was freed by the nazis after one month of imprisonment, during the Jewish festival of Chanukah, on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1938. He appeared in person at the children's Chanukah party. The children and their parents were astonished to see him, with 2 walking sticks and shaven head. He had already suffered from the torture or beatings of the nazis.

In 1939, my parents gave their permission to the school authorities for me to be sent to safety in England. Just before my 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, I left my family and set sail for England, with Dr Reich – the Headmaster - in a group of 10 children aged 3-12 years. 9 of us were Deaf. Another one was a hearing girl. She was the daughter of 2 teachers from Israelite school who had perished in the Holocaust.

It took 2 days to reach England, by ship. We were met at Liverpool by one of our teachers, Mr Benham and taken to the Residential School for Jewish Deaf Children. Just after our arrival at the school, we were sent to bed right away. Since 2 boys and I were the youngest of the group, we were placed in COTS. All of us were not given any food to eat!! I did not see the hearing girl after that.

I was at the school for 10 years from 1939 to 1949, in which time it moved from London to Brighton, then to Havering House in Milton, Wiltshire, then back to London. I grew up like an orphan, without any family. It was hard in many ways. I remember falling out of a window when I was 6 years old and spending 3 months completely alone, with a matron who was cruel, and having no contact with any of the children for all that time.

It was a time of war. Many children went to the countryside and other parts of England to keep away from the bombing of London for safety. During the air-raids, the children and I were sent to the basement to sleep on mattresses or on the floor. The windows were sealed with tapes to protect the glass from falling. I cannot hear anything so, although some people were frightened by the noise, I was not affected by this.

Many of the children went home at the weekends and my only playmate then was my teacher's hearing daughter.

Some children insulted the refugees, calling us bad Germans. As I grew older, I began to understand that the children who came without parents during the years of 1938 – September 1939 were called KINDERTRANSPORTES. It has a different meaning from "refugees".

The school moved from London to Brighton, to Wiltshire, to London. When we moved to London, the children who had no families were made to work hard to clear up the bombed debris, like bricks. The school did not open again for several months and we worked hard tidying up the garden and doing domestic chores until school started again. We never had any homework after the school lessons. We were taught to do domestic work, like darning the children's socks every week, washing up the dishes on a rota basis, clearing up the dining room and looking after the "babies".

When I was a little girl, I always thought of my grandmother and brother – more than I thought about my parents. My parents sent me photos of the family. I slept in a dormitory with boys and girls with a blue or red night lamp. I had nightmares – dreaming of the lamp coming down and biting me!

I grew up very innocent and naïve. The teachers didn't tell us about life and I made up my own fantasies, believing in fairies and thinking that babies came from the stork.

During the war, I was able to send messages to my parents every 6 months, via the Red Cross. The message must be limited to 24 words. It took months to reach my parents by ship, and I received replies, also twice a year, limited to 24 words. Other children in my group may not have heard from their parents during the war. A few were lucky enough to have their relatives visit them, but lost their parents in the Holocaust.

After 1 or 2 years, I got letters from my parents, who had fled to Shanghai. My family had papers to escape to America. But the nazis got hold of my father and made my family their victims. Their papers were taken away. My father had fought in the German army in World War I, supporting Bismarck. Now he was sent to a concentration camp. He was there for 2 months but, somehow, with money, they got papers to travel to Shanghai and my father was released.

So my family went to Shanghai. There were thousands of immigrants there because it was a free port where everybody could go at will, without any special entry visa. My family lived in a very poor ghetto, with other people from all over the world. The Chinese were good to them but they were starving. My mother spent 6 months in hospital with malnutrition and was looked after by nuns.

In 1949, I left the Residential School for Jewish Deaf Children and travelled from London to Southampton where I caught a ship to New York where I was going to meet up with my parents again. I was 14 years old. I was taken to a ship by the matron, with my best friend. They dropped me at the ship and suddenly I realised that they had gone and left me alone, without saying goodbye.

I travelled with a hearing girl who I had never met before. We were on the ship for 7 days, below deck. It was a very rough crossing and everyone was ill. I was sick and had a bad headache.

In New York, after 10 years, I was reunited with my parents. I recognised my father, but it was difficult to know my mother as she looked so different. We lived in a tenement building and, after a week, I started at a new school for Deaf children. It took time to adapt to my new life.

My brother and grandmother had already left Shanghai and gone back to Germany in search of relatives. They hoped to take me away from England. Unfortunately, the nazis caught them in Berlin and made them their victims.

When I was back in New York, I met up with an English boy called Harold who was at school with me in England – and I am happy to say that we have now been married for 35 years.